

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Dinner for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Combatant Commanders, and Their Spouses

May 3, 2023

The President. Again, welcome. And thank you for all—all for being here. Folks, this is something we look forward to since we've become President, and we appreciate you all coming.

Just last week, Jill and I had a chance to host another group: the Air Force Academy football team. *[Laughter]* Now, I notice there's only about a quarter of you cheering. *[Laughter]*

But these young cadets are just starting out. They had the same—but they had the same sense of pride, they had the same sense of purpose and a passion—and you could see it in all of them—the same passion that you all possess. You—I don't—you probably don't even realize what you exude, your confidence in our capacities.

And I told them that they'd soon be joining a long line of American servicemembers, each a link in a chain of honor. And that's how I think about it, when I think of our son. I think of it as a just a chain of honor. Each one.

Over the years, that chain has grown stronger thanks to the generation of military leaders you've all trained. And 75 years of a desegregated military. Seventy-five years of women—full integration. Fifty years of an All-Volunteer force. And that's hard to believe, because I remember most of that. *[Laughter]* Worrisome. Worrisome.

As I said at the dinner for the—with the Correspondents Dinner, I said, "You know, when Jimmy Madison wrote the—that amendment in the Constitution, I was there." *[Laughter]* And everybody said, "Yes, he probably was." I mean—*[laughter]*. But all kidding aside, each one of you over the years, this chain has grown stronger.

And a mark of these milestones, as a consequence, I challenge you to keep strengthening that chain in big and small ways, to keep sharpening our military edge in the field and across the forces, to keep taking on the challenges of today and tomorrow. You know, I mean, when you think about it, there's no question—there's never been in each our minds—but there's no question we have the finest military in the history of the world—and that's not hyperbole, that's literally true—in the history of the world.

And I think other leaders around the world who don't share the same view as we do are beginning to understand that.

In return, you know, the—the fact is, in return, I promise that I will always, always have your back. And our military women and men—and we have sacred obligation—and I know I've said it many, many times—to prepare those we send into harm's way and take care of them and their families when they come home, and to care for them in a way that they deserve. And that's a little bit in dispute right now, but I think we'll get that straightened out too, politically.

And I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the impressive leadership in these last few months. You've armed, you've equipped, and you trained a proud and brave Ukrainian army and helped them preserve their liberty and their democracy.

I spent months in the Ukraine prior to all this happening. And I spoke to the Rada and—when they were having their debates about who among the strongmen would lead.

But I was the—I have to admit to you, I was a little bit surprised just how courageous, how amazingly brave not only the military is, but the Ukrainian people. They're just doing an incredible job. And it's because of you.

Your efforts to evacuate our Embassy as well as—in Sudan—American citizens—to facilitate that. And the treatment and capabilities and commitments of our Armed Forces helping American people anywhere in the world.

I don't—you probably don't think about it, but you're just remarkable, remarkable, remarkable group of people. I mean that sincerely.

Except for Milley. I'm not so sure. *[Laughter]* But—actually, I don't want to—I've embarrassed him. I said, "You know, I'm going to really miss you." He said, "I'm not going anywhere yet." *[Laughter]* "Don't get sentimental on me, Biden. I'm from Boston." *[Laughter]*

But you know, you continue to take terrorists off the battlefield with precision and professionalism, protecting our Nation and our allies and interests against the enduring threat. And each and every day, you put our Nation in the strongest possible strategic position around the world. And that, again, is not hyperbole; that's a fact.

Not just in moments of crisis, where you deliver as only Americans can, but in the critical day-to-day work strengthening our alliances from NATO to Japan and the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. I think the last several years, we've had a pretty good run, in terms of people stepping up and other nations stepping up.

And in anticipation of new threats in areas like the space and cyber and building new partnerships like AUKUS. And you know, taking on the hard missions and—that transcends all our borders. I mean, it's just amazing. From responding from the global pandemic, to addressing historic levels of migration around the world.

In fact, our two combatant commanders, General Cavoli, head of the European Command, and General Langley of the African Command couldn't be with us tonight because they're standing guard right now. They're running—they're doing their job at a critical place in critical ways. They're at their post, dealing with the war in Europe and a crisis in Sudan.

And as you've heard me say before many times—I apologize for repeating it—but America is at—the world is at an inflection point. I used to have a professor in undergraduate school who said an inflection point is where you're going down a highway at 50 miles an hour and you take an abrupt turn right or left, 10, 12 degrees. You can never get back on the road you were on. And it's happening again.

We're at a place where the decisions we've made in the last few years, in the next 3 or 4 years are going to determine what this world is going to look like—not figuratively, literally—the next three, four, five decades. So there's a great deal at stake. A great deal at stake. And most of it is in your hands. You've shouldered the unique demands that come with these changes.

And you know, together, we face new challenges, complex threats, and you've remained unflinching—unflinching—in your pride, in your purpose, and your passion.

And that includes all the leaders who will be changing out this summer. General Milley, who I really will miss. He's one of the best I think I've ever served—been with. General Berger—and the Marines are going to be missing you, pal. And General McConville, Admiral Gilday, General VanHerck, and General Dickinson.

You know, gentlemen, thank you for your service, and thank you from the bottom of our heart. You have our deepest respect and gratitude.

And finally, I want to thank another important group that's here tonight: your spouses and your families. You know, there's that—you also serve. You also sacrifice. And I mean that sincerely. It's not hyperbole. The—you also strengthen our Nation.

The British poet John Milton once wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait." When Beau was in Iraq for a year—before that, he was in Kosovo—I'd watch my wife, who'd get up and go to school. She left a little before me. And she'd be standing by the sink, and she'd be mouthing a prayer that the head of the National Guard in Delaware's wife had given her.

Many of you had to wait for that phone call. You wonder what's going on. And you just—but you're there. You're there. You allow it to work. Whether you're a male or female spouse, you're doing something that is—you're serving the country. It wouldn't work without you.

So tonight I'd like you to please join me in raising your glass. I want to make a toast. To our servicemen and their families, to the chain of honor they create, may it continue to grow stronger generation after generation.

Hear, hear.

[At this point, the President offered a toast.]

Audience members. Hear, hear.

The President. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7 p.m. in the Cross Hall at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA; Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps Gen. David H. Berger, USMC; Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James C. McConville, USA; Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday, USN; Commander of U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Gen. Glen D. VanHerck, USAF; Commander of the U.S. Space Command Gen. James H. Dickinson, USA; and Maj. Gen. Francis D. Vavala (Ret.), former adjutant general, Delaware National Guard, and his wife Jane.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Joint Chiefs of Staff, combatant commanders, and their spouses, dinner with President.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Berger, David H.; Biden, Jill T.; Cavoli, Christopher G.; Dickinson, James H.; Gilday, Michael M.; Langley, Michael E.; McConville, James C.; Milley, Mark A.; VanHerck, Glen D.; Vavala, Francis D.; Vavala, Jane.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S., combatant commanders; AUKUS trilateral security partnership; Australia, defense relationship with U.S.; Counterterrorism efforts; COVID-19 pandemic; Japan, defense relationship with U.S.; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Marine Corps, U.S.; Military families; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Philippines, security cooperation with U.S.; Refugees and global migrants, humanitarian situation; South Korea, defense relationship with U.S.; Sudan, political unrest and violence; Sudan, U.S. Embassy personnel and citizens, evacuation; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Ukraine, U.S. assistance; United Kingdom, defense relationship with U.S.; Veterans benefits.

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